

Past Perfect Tense

The **past perfect**, also called the pluperfect, is a verb tense used to talk about actions that were completed before some point in the past.

We were shocked to discover that someone **had graffitied** “Tootles was here” on our front door. We were relieved that Tootles **had used** washable paint.

The past perfect tense is for talking about something that happened before something else. Imagine waking up one morning and stepping outside to grab the newspaper. On your way back in, you notice a mysterious message scrawled across your front door: Tootles was here. When you’re telling this story to your friends later, how would you describe this moment? You might say something like:

I turned back to the house and saw that some someone named Tootles **had defaced** my front door!

In addition to feeling indignant on your behalf, your friends will also be able to understand that Tootles graffitied the door at some point in the past *before* the moment this morning when you saw his handiwork, because you used the **past perfect** tense to describe the misdeed.

The Past Perfect Formula

The formula for the past perfect tense is **had + [past participle]**. It doesn’t matter if the subject is singular or plural; the formula doesn’t change.

When to Use the Past Perfect

So what’s the difference between past perfect and simple past? When you’re talking about some point in the past and want to reference an

event that happened even earlier, using the past perfect allows you to convey the sequence of the events. It's also clearer and more specific. Consider the difference between these two sentences:

We were relieved that Tootles **used** washable paint. We were relieved that Tootles **had used** washable paint.

It's a subtle difference, but the first sentence doesn't tie Tootles's act of using washable paint to any particular moment in time; readers might interpret it as "We were relieved that Tootles was in the habit of using washable paint." In the second sentence, the past perfect makes it clear that you're talking about a specific instance of using washable paint.

Another time to use the past perfect is when you are expressing a condition and a result:

If I **had woken up** earlier this morning, I would have caught Tootles red-handed.

The past perfect is used in the part of the sentence that explains the condition (the if-clause).

Most often, the reason to write a verb in the past perfect tense is to show that it happened before other actions in the same sentence that are described by verbs in the simple past tense. Writing an entire paragraph with every verb in the past perfect tense is unusual.

When Not to Use the Past Perfect

Don't use the past perfect when you're not trying to convey some sequence of events. If your friends asked what you did after you discovered the graffiti, they would be confused if you said:

I **had cleaned** it off the door.

They'd likely be wondering what happened next because using the past perfect implies that your action of cleaning the door occurred *before* something else happened, but you don't say what that something else is. The "something else" doesn't always have to be explicitly mentioned, but context needs to make it clear. In this case there's no context, so the past perfect doesn't make sense.

How to Make the Past Perfect Negative

Making the past perfect negative is simple! Just insert **not** between **had** and **[past participle]**.

We looked for witnesses, but the neighbors **had not seen** Tootles in the act. If Tootles **had not included** his own name in the message, we would have no idea who was behind it.

How to Ask a Question

The formula for asking a question in the past perfect tense is **had + [subject] + [past participle]**.

Had Tootles **caused** trouble in other neighborhoods before he struck ours?

Common Regular Verbs in the Past Perfect Tense

Infinitive	Past Perfect	Negative
to ask	had asked	had not asked
to work	had worked	had not worked
to call	had called	had not called
to use	had used	had not used

Common Irregular Verbs in the Past Perfect Tense

Infinitive	Past Perfect	Negative
to be	had been	had not been
to have	had had	had not had
to do	had done	had not done
to say	had said	had not said
to get	had gotten*	had not gotten*
to make	had made	had not made
to go	had gone	had not gone
to take	had taken	had not taken
to see	had seen	had not seen
to come	had come	had not come

*The past participle of “to get” is “gotten” in American English. In British English, the past participle is “got.”

References:

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